

Getting Practical Experience in a New Country

by Allan Foster and Pitson Dantanarayana

It is very difficult for new Canadians to find work that draws on and recognizes their experience and qualifications. We've all seen the shows on television about experienced mechanical engineers dispensing drinks at McDonalds and MBAs cleaning office towers at night.

The first question potential employers ask at job interviews is, "What sort of work experience do you have in Canada?" Too often, the answer is, "None."

About three years ago the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) established a policy to try to help new Canadians achieve hands-on experience in their field of expertise through a special volunteer program. Since then, 59 new Canadians have achieved work-related experience and have moved on to permanent jobs both within TRCA and with other employers.

At a multicultural celebration last June, Brian Denney, chief administrative officer of TRCA congratulated all the volunteers and their mentors and explained the motivation for the new policy:

- New Canadians are often highly educated and trained and can bring vast experience and new ideas that are very helpful to organizations.
- From the perspective of natural and cultural heritage, development and protection as part of the process of city building, we need the stories and experiences of people who have lived in other urban communities around the world where the cities are much older than ours. We have a lot to learn from their experience both good and bad.
- We want new Canadians to learn about Canadian natural heritage so that they can

become part of the process of protecting and enhancing it.

- This experience at TRCA will help us to prepare for more immigration that is inevitable given that Canada is such a great place to live.
- As world water issues and other climate change implications intensify, Canada will increasingly be a destination of choice for people from all over the world.
- We have made a good start at TRCA but it is only a beginning. We have to show continuous improvement in the successful integration and celebration of other cultures.
- From an economic point of view, our policy makes good sense because we need new Canadians to be successful; it is important for them to integrate quickly so they can pay taxes, buy homes, build companies, discover new technologies, contribute to international trade and contribute to our economy.
- This experience has the additional benefit of helping us to learn more about our own heritage even if our families have been in Canada for generations.

The following is an example of one of the "graduates" of the volunteer experience program. His name is Pitson Dantanarayana. He was born in India about 50 years ago. He has a master's degree in botany (genetics) as well as two bachelor degrees — one in botany and the other in chemistry. In addition to consulting on and managing various landscape projects and programs, he was a professor for over 20 years at three different universities. He has worked in Sweden, the United Kingdom and Kenya.

When he moved to Canada, he could not find a job in horticulture.

Here is his letter of gratitude:

Dear friends at TRCA:

It is winter in Canada. The newborn snow is like icing, glistening in the sunlight. I dash off to work. It is cold so I slide on my favourite dark blue jacket. On the left side, close to the heart, it bears the logo and inscription, "Toronto and Region Conservation for The Living City." This jacket was one of the gifts I received from TRCA when I left.

I remember the day I left. It was a day to remember. I was out in the native garden beside the office, busy doing my Co-Op placement volunteer service in garden maintenance. My co-supervisor came outside to tell me I was needed in the cafeteria.

I was aghast because the whole office staff was there. In the crowd of over 40 people there were directors, managers, supervisors and colleagues. They had organized a farewell party. What a surprise! It had never crossed my mind that such an event would take place. After all, my supervisor had already taken me out for a farewell lunch a few days earlier. It was all sad and happy at the same time. I wanted to cry.

I started as a total stranger at TRCA. I knew no one. I had opted to complete my Dufferin-Peel Adult Training Course at TRCA. Being a horticulturist, my course instructor had contacted TRCA's volunteer coordinator to set up my placement. What a rewarding tenure it turned out to be!

From day one, I never felt alone. There was always someone to help me in the office. I could use the stationery and take advantage of the photocopier. Then I attended BBQs, seminars and multicultural programs. I was treated like any TRCA staff member. I even took part in a pollution reduction raffle and won a mountain bike! All this and I was just a volunteer! Within a short time, I came to know several staff members who were very helpful with advice, giving me rides to and from home and lending me helpful books. I felt great.

I concentrated on my work, pounding at the grounds, pulling weeds, trimming and pruning. Canadian plants are different. Reading and studying about the native plants, trees and shrubs, I learned about conservation. This all contributed

to that "Canadian experience" that I needed so much as a new immigrant to Canada.

When I was working outside, it was hot; the mercury hit a record high and everyone called out from the office, "Take care." "Work in the shade." "Keep hydrated." It was nice that people cared about me.

It was rewarding to see that the native gardens appeared well-kept and many staff and clients passing by commented on it. I have collected signatories to that effect. This also helped me establish my Canadian experience. I kept a list and noted these valuable experiences in my resume. But that is not the end of the story.

Soon it was time to say "goodbye" to my "family" at the TRCA. As I was packing to leave, I was informed that I had been nominated "Volunteer of the Month." Today I cherish the certificate I received.

One year has already gone by since I volunteered at TRCA and I still remember my good friends, and even phone some of them once in a while . . . after all, family must keep in touch. And, by the way, I used all that experience to get a job and I am still gainfully employed today with an interiorscape company.

Thank you again.

Pitson Dantanarayana

Anyone wishing to learn more about the volunteer experience program can contact the TRCA by visiting www.trca.on.ca/events/volunteer/

Allan Foster is President of the Ontario Society for Environmental Education and a long-time educator at the Kortright Centre for Conservation. If you would like to read more of Allan's stories you can access them at the following link: www.trca.on.ca/parks_and_culture/locations/kortright_centre/about/default.asp?load=allanfoster.

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